

*[redacted]*  
September 7, 2012

Dr. Stephen Falcone  
Superintendent of Schools  
Darien Public Schools  
2 Renshaw Road  
Darien, CT 06820

Dear Steve,

I know that we have talked at length about my concerns about what is going on in the district and the reasons for my departure and I certainly appreciate the time you have spent with me. However, I feel the responsibility, as a dedicated, now former, Darien employee, to reiterate them as clearly and as comprehensively as I can. My departure email also triggered numerous emails from staff members and conversations about what is going on the department. I feel you have the right to know and I am the only person with nothing to lose by telling you.

When I emailed staff about my resignation, many people spoke to me about what is happening in the special education department this year. I think you would be truly astounded by what people have been saying and feeling. They are not simply having trouble adjusting to change or to a new vision. The changes have been so extreme, so rapid, and delivered with such negativity that the department is in turmoil. Numerous people have expressed *extreme* anxiety, fear, frustration and sadness. I have been asked for more letters of recommendation in the past month than in my entire career and, on the first week of school, people were openly talking about when they will begin to look for new jobs, or whether they already have. In responding to my departure email, people's spontaneous comments to me have included that:

- They have never seen anything like this in their 20+ years in education.
- They have described the situation in the department as "disastrous," "horrific," "depressing," "stressful" and just being "hell." They report that they go home crying and are feeling despondent.
- They feel that their professional opinions have been completely "dismissed." (Their word, although I have used it as well.) They do not feel that they are valued or respected.
- They are "embarrassed" by what is happening and to be associated with Darien. Pride has been replaced by shame.
- Someone described one school as being "like a morgue" because people are so sad and that people are going through the stages of grief.
- Staff is trying to "fly under the radar" in order to avoid being in direct conflict with their superiors.
- They have now been told that everything they have been doing is wrong and needs to be changed. Deirdre has described the department as being a "mess," with so many problems to be fixed. She has outright insulted pretty much everything about how things have been done: how IEPs have been written, how services have been delivered, the work staff has been doing, and the way programs have been set up. There is no sense of building on the great work people

are doing. The message has been sent loud and clear that everything is wrong and needs to be fixed.

- People are shocked at the number of derisive facial expressions, disparaging remarks, and outright insults from Deirdre (and possibly Liz) directed at Robin and the way things were done previously. They also perceive a lack of respect for Carleen and her work. (I personally have the sense that Carleen and Laura Straiton are not valued. It is as if there are only two special education administrators who matter, Deirdre and Liz.)
- Multiple people have asked me if I think the district's agenda is to get rid of any staff members perceived as being associated with Robin. The district-level consultants are clear targets and some have been insulted and publicly humiliated by Deirdre in her in-service presentations, apparently in an effort to convey to build up other staff. A change in vision is one thing; publicly stating that the people who have served in consultant roles have no special training, experience or expertise, and implying that we have actually been destructive to staff and students, is disrespectful, demeaning and downright cruel; we have been members of the special education department, too.
- Multiple people have also asked whether it is the district's goal to get rid of special education staff at the top of the pay scale so that younger, cheaper staff can be hired.
- People are afraid to speak up. They perceive Deirdre's administrative style as dictatorial and they are afraid of being accused of insubordination and of losing their jobs if they disagree with anything. It is causing many people tremendous stress to feel that they are being told to do things in a manner that, as experience as professionals, they believe is unacceptable (e.g., not using best practice, doing things that are unprofessional, unethical, or illegal).

Much of the department is demoralized. The word "despondent" keeps coming up. That is the general tenor of the department based on the *countless* number of people who have shared their feelings with me over the last week or so. (I will remind you that my email about my departure was innocuous and did not include any comments about anything going on in the department.) Surely there must be another way of bringing change to the department without having this effect of the staff.

As for me, I fully anticipated that I would be shifted back into a direct service role at some point in the next year and, although I have enjoyed my role these last few years, I was *not at all* upset at the idea of providing therapy to students again. I would have happily accepted a treatment assignment, assuming that I felt reasonably valued as a professional. The issues that I could not live with are disrespect, dishonesty/lack of forthrightness, unethical/illegal decision-making, and ignorance of communication disorders and students with severe disabilities in general.

### *Disrespect*

When I met with Deirdre at the beginning of August, I did anticipate that there would be a change in my position even though you had assured me in the spring that that would not be the case. However, I did not expect her to tell me that I would not be department chair, that my only remaining department chair responsibility would be to complete the CFY supervision, and that my input would not be needed on any other matters relating to speech-language pathology. This is what led me to feel that Deirdre was completely dismissive of me personally. This was quite a blow and one that I simply do not understand given my record of service to the district. I also had the impression that she did not respect

my profession in general. After her conversation with Deirdre [redacted] also expressed that she felt that Deirdre was disrespectful of her and of the profession as well.

When we met together (you, Deirdre, Joan and me), I felt that your message about my responsibilities was clear, but I was confident that, based on what she had told me quite previously, Deirdre felt no need for my input and would tolerate having me as department chair only because she could not eliminate the position yet. I simply had no confidence that I would be able to establish a productive relationship with Deirdre or that she would value my input in any way. These feelings were only confirmed on the day I resigned. Deirdre asked me why I was leaving and she pointed out that she had asked me for my input on how to transition me back to direct service. She stated that this was her way of including me in the process and that she therefore did not understand why I had felt “dismissed.” I replied that, after the level of responsibility I have had, the level of respect I have commanded from all previous special education administrators throughout the years, many special education staff members and others throughout the district and in the community, to have my role so severely limited was a huge blow. I told her that I could not fathom why decisions relating to speech-language pathology services were being made without seeking any input from the single Ph.D.-level speech-language pathologist, or from any of the many talented, experienced SLPs we have on staff. I further pointed out that, while I knew she must have been overwhelmed with work throughout the summer, I could not understand why she did not seek input from people who actually know the students before making decisions. I cited the [redacted] case as an example of when it would have been an excellent idea to reach out to [redacted] (me) for input before making a decision. I told her that, had she asked me what I thought about eliminating [redacted] contract, my reply would have been that it would be a terrible decision because it would mean removing the only person on [redacted] team who really knows [redacted], [redacted], that the parents would file for due process immediately, and that, if it were to go to a hearing, they would win. I stated that I would have hoped that that input would have influenced her decision and that a due process filing, and the expense associated with it, could have been avoided. I do not understand why the basic step of talking to people who actually *know the students*, as actual children with families as opposed to relying solely on their IEPs, is not being taken before decisions are made. That alone conveys a phenomenal lack of respect for staff.

We went on to discuss mistakes that were made this summer in contracts with private SLPs. The errors occurred because we generally do not name specific people in IEPs and because Deirdre tried to figure it out by herself. Had she simply called the case manager, me, I could have explained the services and the contracts would not have wrong. It was in this part of the conversation that we checked with Robin, who happened to be in Carleen’s office, about who was to provide speech-language services to [redacted]. I had said it was to be [redacted] and I confirmed it with Robin, but it was clear that Deirdre did not respect my response or Robin’s when she later emailed you to ask what the team agreed to at the PPT. In that email, she also stated that I had *asked* whether I would be providing the speech-language services to [redacted]. That is not true. The fact is that we were discussing the [redacted] contracts we have with [redacted] (for [redacted]) and what needed to be drafted or corrected, and Deirdre suggested that it would be cheaper if I took over those services.

*Dishonesty, Lack of Forthrightness and Insensitivity*

I cannot tell you how many people have complained to me that Deirdre has lied about numerous things. On the day the four of us met, I was aware that Deirdre lied three times during that one meeting. For example, it is simply not believable that she was not aware that [redacted] was connected to [redacted]. The main reason I do not believe that is because I explained to her myself that [redacted] when we spoke about the cases in July. In addition, I understand that Deirdre had been emailing [redacted] email address, [redacted], and that the contracts have both the company name and the owners' names on them.

At the very least, facts are being represented to different people in different ways. For example, Deirdre has told you that students will get whatever services they need (e.g., one-on-one speech-language therapy). However, she has told SLPs that individual services will only be approved for a very few students and it has been made clear that the recommendation for individual services will require administrative approval. The SLPs feel that their professional opinions are not respected and they are concerned that they will not be able to convince administrators when individual services are *needed*.

There is also a general feeling that the district is no longer being forthright. If an IEP cannot be delivered as planned, the parents are not told immediately; the information is withheld so that the parents have the impression that the district is not being honest. TLC parents have been upset that they did not get letters letting them know who their children's teachers and other service providers would be. For reasons I do not understand, aide assignments were a secret until the morning of the first day of school. Both staff and parents have had the feeling that administration was being obstructive. Administrators did not seem to appreciate that withholding the aide information caused staff members additional stress. For example, not knowing that [redacted] would have the same para as last year caused [redacted] me significant stress because [redacted] did not know whether or not [redacted] would need a great deal of time during the first weeks of school to train a new para. It would have been extremely helpful to know that before 9:00 Monday morning when [redacted] had to go to the office and wait until the school secretary could track down the information for [redacted].

One has the general impression that no one cares if any delays or confusion make things more difficult for staff, students or families, or if staff needs to waste precious work time or personal time. This was true in the spring and over the summer when I was told that CO administrators, first Deirdre and then Judith, would let the SLPs know if their building assignments would be changed for the up-coming year. Despite my pleas to let them know so they could pack their materials appropriately at the end of summer school, these emails did not go out (from Diane Sandor) until after the SLPs had already packed up their things for return to their previous schools. Some SLPs had completed their summer school assignments and were gone by the time the emails went out. This is disrespectful and insensitive.

### *Unethical/Illegal Decisions*

The main point that has come up in both one-on-one conversations with Deirdre and in in-service presentations is how much special education costs, how little the law requires and how "ridiculous" our IEPs are. There is no discussion of providing the students with the best programs and services we can, like we do for students in regular education. It is clear that the goal is to provide the minimum

amount of services the law requires, if that. This is disappointing in a district that strives to provide a truly excellent education to students who are not in special education.

The original decision not to provide [redacted] with a para is one example of cost-cutting that is simply ridiculous. The “logic” was that, since [redacted] regular education teacher is also a certified special education teacher, [redacted] would not need a paraprofessional in the classroom. While it is wonderful that [redacted] teacher is dual-certified, she cannot teach the class, attend to all the students’ needs, and be one student’s para at the same time. This student is in [redacted] grade with a reading level much lower than [redacted] classmates. [redacted] cannot read routine directions. [redacted] also has significant attention and behavioral challenges. It is absurd to think that [redacted] teacher would be able to effectively manage the class and give [redacted] the attention [redacted] needs in order to be successful, not to mention the fact that [redacted] IEP specifies that [redacted] be provided with para support; I do not understand how anyone could think that the District could defend the decision not to give [redacted] a para. Furthermore, given the parents’ response to the changes in [redacted], one might have anticipated that they would not react positively if paraprofessional support were withheld.

In short, multiple decisions are being made without knowing the students or their needs. Decisions are made off of IEPs without concern for the impact on the student. The [redacted] cases are just two examples.

The sweeping decisions (e.g., no more team meetings, minimal individual services, etc.) give the impression that Darien is providing one-size-fits-all special education services, not individualized programs. Furthermore, the decisions are clearly being made at the administrative level and input from staff is not sought, appreciated or valued. This puts the district at risk by violating of the requirement that be a continuum of service offered and by giving the appearance that decisions are being made outside of PPTs. In addition, the decisions that Deirdre is making are pushing the limit between administrative and professional decisions. It is simply ridiculous for someone who has no understanding of speech and language disorders to be imposing clinical decisions on SLPs. (Clinical is the right word. I am using it to refer to the technical, professional decisions in the field of speech-language pathology. It does not imply non-school-based.) Lastly, the decisions and policies being made by both special education and regular education administrators are forcing SLPs to make difficult decisions: to provide services in accordance with what they feel is appropriate based on their professional training as speech-language pathologists or to follow directives from administrators and risk violating ASHA’s Code of Ethics. This is not a position that they should be forced to deal with.

### *Ignorance*

Deirdre’s lack of understanding of speech-language pathology, communication disorders and the general nature of children with severe disabilities is truly appalling. Her astonishment over having a student in elementary school who needs toilet-training, her surprise that he and other students are not included in regular education more when they have profound intellectual, language and other impairments is not a reflection of Darien’s staff and programming. It is a reflection of Deirdre’s ignorance about these students and their disabilities. These programs were developed with input from the school team and from the students’ parents; some parents value having their children learn to use the bathroom, feed themselves, respond to simple commands and express their basic desires over

spending time in a regular education classroom where the instruction is years above what they can understand, particularly for some of these students who are not able to tolerate or benefit from being with peers.

I have never, in 28 years, ever had to explain to any special education professional that speech-language pathologists deliver speech-language *therapy*; we do not only deliver “therapy” in a “clinical” setting. It is my clear impression that many administrators do not understand what speech-language impairments are and what speech-language therapy is. Children with speech-language impairments have speech and/or language skills that are significantly different from what is typical of students their age. Their development is atypical and they require intervention to learn those skills. They have already been exposed to normal speech-language input and that has not been enough; they need therapy.

Speech-language therapy is specially designed instruction that uses specific activities and strategies to teach and elicit specific speech, language and communication skills. The instruction must be sufficiently intense/frequent for the child to practice and learn the skills, and make progress on goals and objectives. Work continues until goals and objectives are mastered. Depending on the skills being targeting, pushing into a classroom may or may not be appropriate. Some of the benefits of push-in therapy are that it is often necessary for addressing social-pragmatic skills and that it fosters generalization. Some of the main disadvantages are that the SLP often has little to no control over what is being done in the classroom and opportunities for practicing IEP goals and objectives are often severely limited. Other issues include privacy/confidentiality and students’ feelings about working on speech-language goals in the regular education setting. The fact is, it is not *always* better for students to be taught in the classroom. There is a trade-off and the need for students to make progress on their communication objectives needs to be balanced with their other needs.

Similarly, group work is often appropriate and necessary, but it is simply not appropriate for all children. Some students *cannot* yet learn in a group situation; developmentally, they are at the level where they need one-on-one interaction with an adult. Furthermore, at a certain point, groups become so large that we are not providing therapy; the number of practice trials is not sufficiently frequent or intense for the student to learn the skill and make progress. If they could learn adequately from a few trials per half hour, they would not need speech-language therapy.

There seems to be a perception that SLPs want to keep the number of students in their sessions lower because it is easier. That is partially true: It is very difficult to design lessons that appropriately and effectively target many different students’ speech, language and communication goals and objectives at the same time while ensuring that enough opportunities for practice that they actually make progress and master their goals, and often managing challenging behavior at the same time. The fact is that research supports better outcomes for children when they have more practice working on skills, and they can practice those skills more when there are fewer children in the group. It is not a question of what can and cannot be done; it is a question of what constitutes effective therapy and best practice.

In terms of looking at the number of students receiving speech-language therapy, I am concerned that Deirdre does not appear to understand that many students with other primary disabilities (e.g., autism,

intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, hearing impairment) have, as part of their disabilities or in addition to their primary disability, significant speech-language impairments.

### *Other Issues*

I have spent much of my time at Ox Ridge during these first two week of school and these are my impressions based on the time I spent there. I understand from people throughout the district that their experiences are similar, though perhaps not as severe.

The beginning of this school year was extremely rocky for special education staff. I have been told that it was rocky for regular education staff, too, but no one has confided in me directly.

When the four of us met, Deirdre assured us that the SLPs' schedules at Ox Ridge had been done. That was not the case. She and Luke assigned the caseloads, but the schedules were not done. (I have never heard of an administrator of any sort scheduling any special educator's schedule.) Although Judith assured me that the SLPs would have input on the caseloads, that was not the case at Ox Ridge. Judith had suggested that special education teacher and SLPS should be alternating grade levels instead of adjacent grades (i.e., first and third, instead of Kindergarten and first), I suggested that adjacent would be better because it typically allows for more cross-grade level groupings. She assured me that that could certainly be done, and that SLPs would have input into the caseloads. That did not happen at Ox Ridge. The SLPs were handed caseloads, with alternating grades. I think that Deirdre and Luke looked at some factors (e.g., number of triennials), but they did not consider all relevant factors, such as the actual number of IEPed hours, who had the specific training and experience with different students, whether it is actually appropriate to group students based on their goals, objectives and other factors. These decisions require input from people who know the students and the specifics of their IEPs; it cannot be done correctly just be looking at grade levels and a few numbers.

One example of a poor decision that came out of this process was assigning [redacted] to a new SLP. The major reason for assigning [redacted] to [redacted] was [redacted]. [redacted] is [redacted]; [redacted] uses some [redacted] and has a communication device [redacted]. It makes absolutely no sense for someone new to start with [redacted]. Fortunately, the SLPs decided to override the decision handed to them by administrators [redacted]. Assigning the caseloads without any SLP input at all is absurd.

Not having classroom schedules available until the end of the day on Friday prior to the start of school prevented adequate and ordinary planning and scheduling. As I told you when we last spoke, this was the first year since I have been involved in TLC (12 years) that TLC staff was not able to start the school year with tentative schedules for their students. This caused a delay in starting students' services. Not being able to schedule on Friday also made the scheduling itself more difficult because, once school starts, it is very hard to get all staff together in one place at one time. It was a frustrating and inefficient experience for all involved.

Two weeks into school, the SLPs at Ox Ridge now have schedules done. They cannot fit all of the required hours into their work day and some students will not be getting IEPed services. The SLPs cannot fit these hours into their schedules. Also, it has not been made clear to them if there will still be designated PPT blocks or when those blocks will be. The common planning times have not been

scheduled either. It takes hours for an SLP to create a schedule at the beginning of the year and it is much harder when the schedules are so tight. If/when the PPT blocks and common planning times are scheduled, they will have to do their schedules over, and it will be a tremendous waste of time.

Perhaps the SLPs will not be included in those common planning times. I would not be surprised since their input does not seem valued by so many people.

With regard to the speech-language pathologists' caseloads, caseloads should not, and cannot, take into account only direct service hours. There is more to special education/speech-language pathology than the direct teaching of children. Planning/preparation, consultation to staff, case management responsibilities, evaluations (i.e., observing, testing, scoring, report-writing, completing eligibility forms, drafting goals and objectives, reviewing reports with parents), IEP preparation and paperwork, and other responsibilities take up many hours per week. Without adequate time during the day, staff will be forced to either work endless hours at night or will find it impossible to provide adequate services. The way that the SLPs, and other special education staff too, are being expected to work will make it impossible for them to provide good services. It also conveys a profound lack of respect and appreciation for the work that is required of them to do their jobs well.

Steve, obviously, I have nothing to gain personally by writing this letter, and I have nothing more to lose. I decided to write this letter for two reasons. First, I wanted to make sure that it clear why I decided to leave. It was not because I was to be assigned a caseload or because of an unwillingness to work out philosophical differences. If I held any hope at all that I my professional experience and opinions would be valued and respected, I would have stayed, but it was absolutely clear to me that that would not happen. In 28 years in the field, I have worked with many different special education administrators and other program directors, and I have never experienced anything even remotely like what I have experienced over the last month. Quite simply, I decided to leave because I felt that I could not work under the current conditions in the department: disrespect for professionals, dishonesty, obstructiveness, and inappropriate, unethical decisions that are not in the best interests of students. I cannot work under these conditions; none of us should have to.

I also decided to write this because the comments that have been made to me over the last few weeks have been overwhelming and your staff members do not have a voice. They are fearful of losing their jobs. It is clear that open and honest discussions are not welcome, professionals' knowledge, experience and expertise is not valued unless it is in complete agreement with the directives from administration, and no one wants to be the next victim of a public humiliation. It has been horrible to witness the sadness and stress that so many staff members are feeling.

I hope that something can be done so that a reasonable level of service can be maintained for the students of Darien and I also hope that the deplorable conditions in the department can be improved. People should not have to endure this and it will only detract from their ability to work effectively with their students.

Sincerely,

Julie Bookbinder, Ph.D., CCC-SLP